

THE EMPEROR CARD



A Tarot Mystery by

Bevan Atkinson

The Tarot Mysteries by Bevan Atkinson

The Empress Card

The High Priestess Card

The Magician Card

The Fool Card

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"I felt very still and empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo."

—Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*

"Our real discoveries come from chaos, from going to the place that looks wrong and stupid and foolish."

—Chuck Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*

"Whoever survives a test, whatever it may be, must tell the story."

—Elie Wiesel

1 The Emperor Card ♠



I don't know about you, but I'm not accustomed to coming home on an airless sultry day, letting the two excited, capering dogs out into the side-yard dog run, going upstairs and peeling off my clinging downtown clothes, taking a tepid shower to wash off the stickiness, clipping the tags off of and sliding into a newly purchased gauzy sundress, pouring a lovely tall glass of iced mint tea, letting the still-excited dogs back into the kitchen and giving them a treat, carrying the plastic glass of iced tea through the curtained French doors and out to the deck to see if anything resembling a cool breeze from the always cold Pacific Ocean a hundred yards away would please blow the edge off weather my friend Chris Sears refers to as "hot as fried hell," only to discover a dead body in my back yard.

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Finding a bloody, supine corpse in my fenced Japanese garden is, to me anyway if not to you, a considerable shock. I dropped the iced tea, and ice cubes and tea splashed onto my flip-flopped feet. I broke out in goose bumps and a case of the shivers, no cool breeze required. I mostly just stood there gawping mindlessly for a good long time.

I gawped at the man's long body, at the edge of the man's face, his features pressed into the carefully raked sand. I registered the body as that of a gray-haired Caucasian. What skin I could see, except for his cheek, was tanned. For a moment I took in the shape of his sprawled left hand.

I forced myself to expand my focus to his partly untucked and shabby white oxford-cloth dress shirt and faded navy slacks. A leather belt cinched the fabric into pleats at his waist. This man had lost a lot of weight without buying new clothing to fit his smaller circumference.

I could see the outline of a sleeveless undershirt beneath the collared oxford cloth, the tan skin on his torso silhouetted against the white of the undershirt. He didn't have a golfer's tan; he spent time outside without a shirt on.

One down-at-heel black lace-up leather shoe had come off and was resting sideways next to his left foot. A black sock was pulled mostly off, the baggy toe flopping empty on the sand. The exposed heel showed roughened white cracks.

Rusty brown dried blood had soaked the back of his shirt. A long knife blade glinted next to a

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tuft of tall grass a few feet away from the corpse.

Blowflies buzzed and dropped into a trail of swarming ants. A momentary breeze bearing an indescribably awful smell woke me up from my gawping.

I took a deep breath through my mouth, let it out slowly, and backed through the French doors, heedless of tracking cold wet tea onto the floor of the darkened house.

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Before calling the cops, I called Thorne.

"Steer clear for the duration," I said. My voice shook when I said the words.

"No," he said. "I'm on the way."

"You are not," I said. "Of course not. Don't even consider coming here until everything has settled down. We'll meet up later to talk about what to do."

Thorne is so far off the grid that his existence is offensive to the bureaucrats who like to keep track of all available humans; for instance, the IRS, the Census Bureau, the Department of Motor Vehicles, and any and all police officers.

"I don't care," he said. "Better me than you."

"No. I can handle this."

I started to sob.

"Babe," Thorne said, and waited. I pulled myself together.

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"Something very strange is happening here," I said. And then I told him what he knew anyway, because I needed to talk. Just talk and talk.

"You and I both know that when anyone is murdered on your property they look at you first. Meaning me. I have an alibi, and I have identification. You have no ID and they will arrest you, and then they'll want to keep you forever because you have nothing to prove who you are, or why they should let you out of their sight. Please, Thorne. Unless you murdered the man out there in the yard, you should stay away."

He was quiet, which is what he generally is. For a moment I wondered whether he was actually responsible for the dead man. I ruled that out when I realized that of course Thorne was capable of homicide, but he could not have been responsible for this one, because if Thorne had killed this man the corpse would never be found; it certainly would not be dumped in my garden for me to come home to after a long muggy day full of errands and shopping.

"Buy a burner phone and give the number to Nora," he said, referring to my sister, who with her husband and multicultural array of children lives nearby, in a far ritzier San Francisco neighborhood than I can afford—although affording real estate of any kind in San Francisco is out of the question for anyone who didn't start the process somewhere back when the T. Rex, not the mortgage broker, was the alpha predator.

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“Your world is going to devolve into preposterous chaos,” Thorne said.

He attended an haute-WASP prep school back East and went on to Princeton and Harvard Business School before becoming a big bad wolf of a bodyguard. Every so often words like “devolve” and “preposterous” slip out.

“I know. I’ll deal with it. And maybe we can meet up later at East-West,” I said.

The East-West Café is our go-to choice for off-site refreshment. Since I never cook, nor should anyone want me to, available off-site refreshment is a major priority.

“Yes,” he said. And then, “I’m here. Always,” except then he was gone.

I called 9-1-1 and the dispatcher told me to go stand outside the house and wait for the police to arrive, and to stay on the phone until they did.

“I’m going to lock up the pets first,” I said, whistling for the reluctant dogs and carrying the pair of dozing black cats up into the third-floor bedroom that serves as an office, where I shut the door on all of them.

Yes, two dogs and two cats constitute a lot of pets, and one of the dogs—Hawk, the black Great Dane/Mastiff mix—counts as three or four or a dozen dogs at once. But I’m a grown-up now and I can have as many pets as I want to while I’m eating ice cream for dinner. Nevertheless, herding them all, especially Hawk, out of the way of armed minions of the law seemed like a prudent

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thing to do if the soon-to-seem-endless parade of law enforcement personnel were to enter and exit unthreatened by such an imposing pooch.

Outside on the front steps, I sat myself down with the phone to my ear and waited for the preposterous chaos to devolve into high gear.

Which it did.